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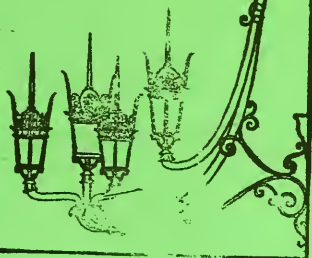
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WASHINGTON PARK

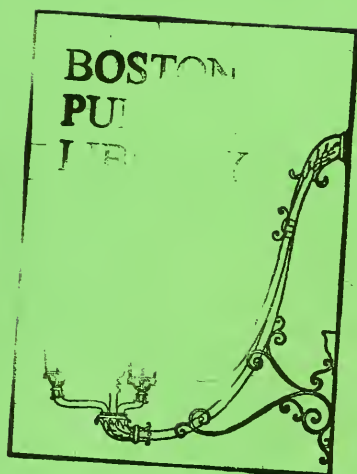
Y. Gross

"A project that almost made it."
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A project that almost made it

Left incomplete, lacking maintenance funds, Washington Park is unraveling

By Viola Osgood
Globe Staff

It was one of the most important projects undertaken by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) — and the only major renewal effort in the black community.

But 15 years and \$70.4 million later, the renewal of Washington Park — a 502-acre neighborhood carved out of the larger Roxbury community by the deft penstrokes of BRA planners — is considered a failure by many of those involved.

Largely because the project lacked a built-in maintenance program, and also because it was only 80 to 85 percent completed, the area is becoming as deteriorated as it was before renewal.

Otto Snowden of Roxbury's Freedom House, one of the community forces behind renewal in Washington Park, said, "I believe it's just a matter of time until all the money spent here will have gone down the drain.

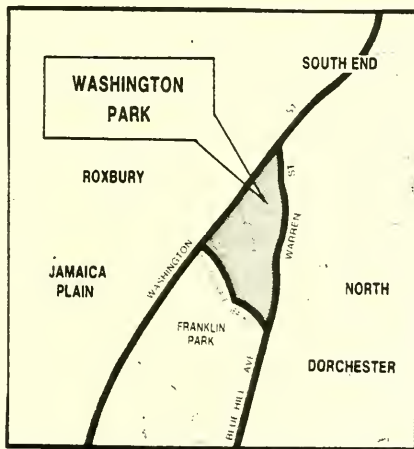
"Because the project wasn't completed, it will probably fail," he said. "If it had been finished, it would have been a very good thing for the community."

"As it is," he continued, "the project wasn't completed and there was no follow-up to see that the area was supplied with the necessary city and social services. Of course we never got them."

The area mapped out for the renewal program in the early 1960s was a cross-section of the larger community. There was diversity in incomes, and the housing was as varied as any could be in the same area.

The neighborhood's black middle-class lived on tree-lined streets in well-maintained homes. Blue-collar families and the elderly inhabited the deteriorating apartment houses, many of which required extensive renovation.

And, on the fringes of the community, in the worst housing along Warren street and under the El (rapid transit) tracks on Washington street, dwelled the poor.



Map locates Washington Park project in Roxbury.

Elements in the community were clamoring for renewal as a way to keep the entire area, particularly the upper middle-class section known as upper Roxbury, from becoming a slum.

The BRA, after working with community groups for two years, responded in 1963 with an ambitious plan the agency said would make Washington Park "a better neighborhood in a better Boston."

The plan called for major rehabilitation of a good deal of the existing housing stock, construction of new housing, new schools, libraries and other public buildings, and for recreation facilities and spaces, including a series of tot lots.

The renewal brought a number of much needed facilities to the community and, if it had been executed as it was conceived, the program could have upgraded the entire Roxbury community.

In the end, however, the community was left with a number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots, which give the appearance of blight.

Snowden expressed the opinion that these houses and lots, some of which

would have been built on if the renewal project had been completed, will lead to the deterioration of the neighborhood. He was one of the residents who originally requested the BRA carry out extensive demolition in the area.

The question of demolition was one of the strong points of disagreement between the BRA and the community. One group of residents asked for demolition that would have required the relocation of 60 percent of the area's population.

The BRA, still reeling from criticism leveled at the agency because of the wholesale demolition that had taken place in the West End, was wary of getting into a similar situation in Roxbury. The authority finally decided on a 30 percent relocation.

Despite what appears to be general dissatisfaction with the overall results of the project, there are those who feel that the project was worthwhile for what it did.

Florence Smith, a resident of one of the developments built in Washington Park, said, "I realize that there are a lot of things that should have been done and weren't. But, I had been living in an awful dump on Washington street before I moved into my new apartment, so I'm grateful there was a project. It gave me a decent place to live."

Snowden, too, conceded: "Renewal has been very helpful. The area got two elderly developments, a community health center and other developments. These are things we wouldn't have gotten without renewal."

In a study commissioned by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) two years ago and carried out by Real Estate Research Inc., it was found that, up until 1967, the rate of progress at Washington Park was normal. In 1967, the first problems began and work on the project slowed. A moratorium had



the recreation complex at the intersection of Washington street and Martin Luther King boulevard.

been called on all school construction in the city pending a decision by the federal court on school desegregation.

At the same time, the federal government had sharply reduced the amount of money being allocated for such projects.

Real Estate Research said, however, that the work that had been done in Washington Park was impressive as to quality and design.

The study further pointed out that the project was isolated, its perimeters surrounded by areas in various stages of deterioration. It posed the question of whether Washington Park can hold its own against such negative outside influences.

the parking lot for the most part, seems to suffer from a chronic lack of even the most superficial maintenance, such as sweeping or snow shoveling.

"The shopping center idea was a failure," said Edward Logue, former BRA director under whom the project was initiated. "That idea just hasn't worked."

Logue, now in charge of the South Bronx, N.Y., rehabilitation program, said the best thing that happened in the Washington Park project was the rehabilitation work on 4604 units.

Logue said as far as the new housing is concerned, it can only be saved by turning many of the developments over from rentals to owner-occupied units.

struction, which included a YMCA, a Boys' Club, the Trotter School, the Washington Park recreation area (swimming pool, skating rink, and open space); a Grove Hall branch library; a Civic Center (police station, library and courthouse); the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center, and three churches.

Of the funds expended, Memolo said, \$31.3 million came from HUD, \$37.7 million from local government, and \$1.4 million in a grant from the Economic Development Administration of the Commerce Department.

"The problems speak ... to a program that failed, not because it was badly conceptualized, not because it was for poor people and blacks, but because of a lack of maintenance."

— PAUL PARKS, who was involved in the project's design

But even some of the new developments, constructed under the urban renewal plan, have started to deteriorate, due largely to a lack of upkeep and the absence of funds for such maintenance.

The manager of one development, who asked not to be identified, said that keeping rents affordable for the low-income precluded keeping the properties in top shape in an inflationary economy.

"We try to do the best we can," the manager said. "The trash is always picked up, the snow always shoveled, but for major jobs like painting, this place's needs are just beyond our means."

This sentiment was echoed by managers at other developments.

One of the most apparent failures of the development is the Washington Park Mall shopping center at the corner of Warren street and Martin Luther King Boulevard.

The mall, even though it is conveniently located for residents of the area, cannot compete with the attraction of the downtown area or the suburban malls, according to some residents who said they would rather not shop there.

The area around the mall, including

State Secretary of Educational Affairs Paul Parks, who designed one of the developments and was active in the Washington Park renewal, said, "At the time, it was a good idea. But there is a definite need for maintenance. There was never any money for that. But it definitely is the solution to some of the problems in the area."

"The problems that you're seeing now in Washington Park speak to a program that failed, not because it was badly conceptualized, not because it was for poor people and blacks, but because of a lack of maintenance."

Ralph Memolo, public relations director for the BRA, outlined what took place in Washington Park in the way of development.

He said some 2626 families had been relocated, some within the renewal area. At the time the project started, the area had a population of almost 26,000. Today, there are just over 20,000 residents.

Memolo said 1943 units of housing were constructed in addition to those renovated.

One of the big triumphs of the project was in the area of public facilities con-

struction, which included a YMCA, a Boys' Club, the Trotter School, the Washington Park recreation area (swimming pool, skating rink, and open space); a Grove Hall branch library; a Civic Center (police station, library and courthouse); the Roxbury Comprehensive Community Health Center, and three churches.

But what is obvious to many residents now is that the model community they had hoped for under the renewal program is designed to become just another unrealized dream.

The project was declared "substantially complete" and was officially closed out by the BRA last year. This meant that any hopes for more facilities and housing were lost.

The community still has its weed-covered lots and its abandoned houses that are viewed as unsightly fire hazards.

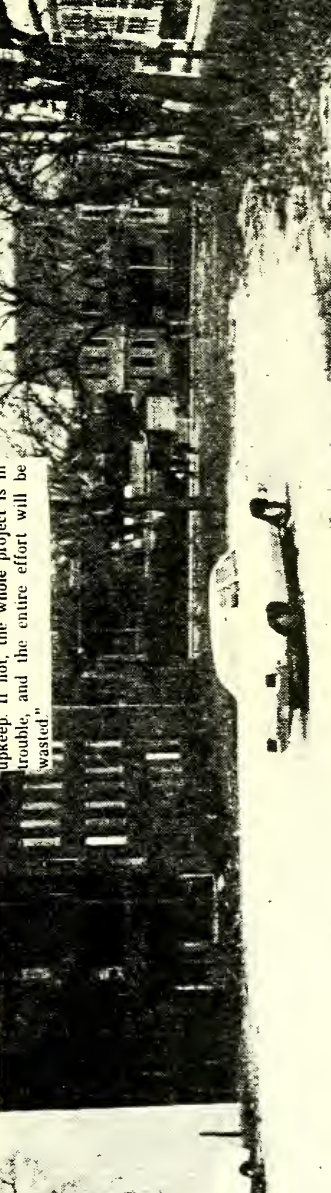
The question that remains for the future of Washington Park is whether the community, made by planners, can stand on its own without a substantial input of funds from the outside.

The Real Estate Research study concluded, "As a single project standing alone, it is fighting trends in that area of the city that are simply overpowering, and its longterm prospects are poor."

"Signs of blight and deterioration are abundantly visible," the study said. "To maintain standard housing will require a continuous input of funds and efforts ..."

Parks' answer to the question of whether the community can fight off decay without maintenance funding is a resounding "no."

tained. People have to feel proud or where they live if they are to assist in its upkeep. If not, the whole project is in trouble, and the entire effort will be "wasted."



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